



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH ONE

The Story Continued by Marian Halcombe, Part II

LIMMERIDGE HOUSE.

November 27th.—My forebodings are realised. The marriage is fixed for the twenty-second of December.

The day after we left for Polesdean Lodge Sir Percival wrote, it seems, to Mr. Fairlie, to say that the necessary repairs and alterations in his house in Hampshire would occupy a much longer time in completion than he had originally anticipated. The proper estimates were to be submitted to him as soon as possible, and it would greatly facilitate his entering into definite arrangements with the workpeople, if he could be informed of the exact period at which the wedding ceremony might be expected to take place. He could then make all his calculations in reference to time, besides writing the necessary apologies to friends who had been engaged to visit him that winter, and who could not, of course, be received when the house was in the hands of the workmen.

To this letter Mr. Fairlie had replied by requesting Sir Percival himself to suggest a day for the marriage, subject to Miss Fairlie's approval, which her guardian willingly undertook to do his best to obtain. Sir Percival wrote back by the next post, and proposed (in accordance with his own views and wishes from the first? the latter part of December—perhaps the twenty-second, or twenty-fourth, or any other day that the lady and her guardian might prefer. The lady not being at hand to speak for herself, her guardian had decided, in her absence, on the earliest day mentioned—the twenty-second of December, and had written to recall us to Limmeridge in consequence.

After explaining these particulars to me at a private interview yesterday, Mr. Fairlie suggested, in his most amiable manner, that I should open the necessary negotiations to-day. Feeling that resistance was useless, unless I could first obtain Laura's authority to make it, I consented to speak to her, but declared, at the same time, that I would on no consideration undertake to gain her consent to Sir Percival's wishes. Mr. Fairlie complimented me on my "excellent conscience," much as he would

have complimented me, if he had been out walking, on my “excellent constitution,” and seemed perfectly satisfied, so far, with having simply shifted one more family responsibility from his own shoulders to mine.

This morning I spoke to Laura as I had promised. The composure—I may almost say, the insensibility—which she has so strangely and so resolutely maintained ever since Sir Percival left us, was not proof against the shock of the news I had to tell her. She turned pale and trembled violently.

“Not so soon!” she pleaded. “Oh, Marian, not so soon!”

The slightest hint she could give was enough for me. I rose to leave the room, and fight her battle for her at once with Mr. Fairlie.

Just as my hand was on the door, she caught fast hold of my dress and stopped me.

“Let me go!” I said. “My tongue burns to tell your uncle that he and Sir Percival are not to have it all their own way.”

She sighed bitterly, and still held my dress.

“No!” she said faintly. “Too late, Marian, too late!”

“Not a minute too late,” I retorted. “The question of time is OUR question—and trust me, Laura, to take a woman’s full advantage of it.”

I unclasped her hand from my gown while I spoke; but she slipped both her arms round my waist at the same moment, and held me more effectually than ever.

“It will only involve us in more trouble and more confusion,” she said. “It will set you and my uncle at variance, and bring Sir Percival here again with fresh causes of complaint—”

“So much the better!” I cried out passionately. “Who cares for his causes of complaint? Are you to break your heart to set his mind at ease? No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace—they drag us away from our parents’ love and our sisters’ friendship—they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel. And what does the best of them give us in return? Let me go, Laura—I’m mad when I think of it!”

The tears—miserable, weak, women’s tears of vexation and rage—started to my eyes. She smiled sadly, and put her handkerchief over my face to hide for me the betrayal of my own weakness—the weakness of all others which she knew that I most despised.

“Oh, Marian!” she said. “You crying! Think what you would say to me, if the places were changed, and if those tears were mine. All your love and courage and

devotion will not alter what must happen, sooner or later. Let my uncle have his way. Let us have no more troubles and heart-burnings that any sacrifice of mine can prevent. Say you will live with me, Marian, when I am married—and say no more.”

But I did say more. I forced back the contemptible tears that were no relief to ME, and that only distressed HER, and reasoned and pleaded as calmly as I could. It was of no avail. She made me twice repeat the promise to live with her when she was married, and then suddenly asked a question which turned my sorrow and my sympathy for her into a new direction.

“While we were at Polesdean,” she said, “you had a letter, Marian——”

Her altered tone—the abrupt manner in which she looked away from me and hid her face on my shoulder—the hesitation which silenced her before she had completed her question, all told me, but too plainly, to whom the half-expressed inquiry pointed.

“I thought, Laura, that you and I were never to refer to him again,” I said gently.

“You had a letter from him?” she persisted.

“Yes,” I replied, “if you must know it.”

“Do you mean to write to him again?”

I hesitated. I had been afraid to tell her of his absence from England, or of the manner in which my exertions to serve his new hopes and projects had connected me with his departure. What answer could I make? He was gone where no letters could reach him for months, perhaps for years, to come.

“Suppose I do mean to write to him again,” I said at last. “What then, Laura?”

Her cheek grew burning hot against my neck, and her arms trembled and tightened round me.

“Don’t tell him about THE TWENTY-SECOND,” she whispered. “Promise, Marian—pray promise you will not even mention my name to him when you write next.”

I gave the promise. No words can say how sorrowfully I gave it. She instantly took her arm from my waist, walked away to the window, and stood looking out with her back to me. After a moment she spoke once more, but without turning round, without allowing me to catch the smallest glimpse of her face.

“Are you going to my uncle’s room?” she asked. “Will you say that I consent to whatever arrangement he may think best? Never mind leaving me, Marian. I shall be better alone for a little while.”

I went out. If, as soon as I got into the passage, I could have transported Mr. Fairlie and Sir Percival Glyde to the uttermost ends of the earth by lifting one of my

fingers, that finger would have been raised without an instant's hesitation. For once my unhappy temper now stood my friend. I should have broken down altogether and burst into a violent fit of crying, if my tears had not been all burnt up in the heat of my anger. As it was, I dashed into Mr. Fairlie's room—called to him as harshly as possible, "Laura consents to the twenty-second"—and dashed out again without waiting for a word of answer. I banged the door after me, and I hope I shattered Mr. Fairlie's nervous system for the rest of the day.

28th.—This morning I read poor Hartright's farewell letter over again, a doubt having crossed my mind since yesterday, whether I am acting wisely in concealing the fact of his departure from Laura.

On reflection, I still think I am right. The allusions in his letter to the preparations made for the expedition to Central America, all show that the leaders of it know it to be dangerous. If the discovery of this makes me uneasy, what would it make HER? It is bad enough to feel that his departure has deprived us of the friend of all others to whose devotion we could trust in the hour of need, if ever that hour comes and finds us helpless; but it is far worse to know that he has gone from us to face the perils of a bad climate, a wild country, and a disturbed population. Surely it would be a cruel candour to tell Laura this, without a pressing and a positive necessity for it?

I almost doubt whether I ought not to go a step farther, and burn the letter at once, for fear of its one day falling into wrong hands. It not only refers to Laura in terms which ought to remain a secret for ever between the writer and me, but it reiterates his suspicion—so obstinate, so unaccountable, and so alarming—that he has been secretly watched since he left Limmeridge. He declares that he saw the faces of the two strange men who followed him about the streets of London, watching him among the crowd which gathered at Liverpool to see the expedition embark, and he positively asserts that he heard the name of Anne Catherick pronounced behind him as he got into the boat. His own words are, "These events have a meaning, these events must lead to a result. The mystery of Anne Catherick is NOT cleared up yet. She may never cross my path again, but if ever she crosses yours, make better use of the opportunity, Miss Halcombe, than I made of it. I speak on strong conviction—I entreat you to remember what I say." These are his own expressions. There is no danger of my forgetting them—my memory is only too ready to dwell on any words of Hartright's that refer to Anne Catherick. But there is danger in my keeping the letter. The merest accident might place

it at the mercy of strangers. I may fall ill—I may die. Better to burn it at once, and have one anxiety the less.

It is burnt. The ashes of his farewell letter—the last he may ever write to me—lie in a few black fragments on the hearth. Is this the sad end to all that sad story? Oh, not the end—surely, surely not the end already!

29th.—The preparations for the marriage have begun. The dressmaker has come to receive her orders. Laura is perfectly impassive, perfectly careless about the question of all others in which a woman's personal interests are most closely bound up. She has left it all to the dressmaker and to me. If poor Hartright had been the baronet, and the husband of her father's choice, how differently she would have behaved! How anxious and capricious she would have been, and what a hard task the best of dressmakers would have found it to please her!

30th.—We hear every day from Sir Percival. The last news is that the alterations in his house will occupy from four to six months before they can be properly completed. If painters, paperhangers, and upholsterers could make happiness as well as splendour, I should be interested about their proceedings in Laura's future home. As it is, the only part of Sir Percival's last letter which does not leave me as it found me, perfectly indifferent to all his plans and projects, is the part which refers to the wedding tour. He proposes, as Laura is delicate, and as the winter threatens to be unusually severe, to take her to Rome, and to remain in Italy until the early part of next summer. If this plan should not be approved, he is equally ready, although he has no establishment of his own in town, to spend the season in London, in the most suitable furnished house that can be obtained for the purpose.

Putting myself and my own feelings entirely out of the question (which it is my duty to do, and which I have done), I, for one, have no doubt of the propriety of adopting the first of these proposals. In either case a separation between Laura and me is inevitable. It will be a longer separation, in the event of their going abroad, than it would be in the event of their remaining in London—but we must set against this disadvantage the benefit to Laura, on the other side, of passing the winter in a mild climate, and more than that, the immense assistance in raising her spirits, and reconciling her to her new existence, which the mere wonder and excitement of travelling for the first time in her life in the most interesting country in the world, must surely afford. She is not of a disposition to find resources in the conventional

gaieties and excitements of London. They would only make the first oppression of this lamentable marriage fall the heavier on her. I dread the beginning of her new life more than words can tell, but I see some hope for her if she travels—none if she remains at home.

It is strange to look back at this latest entry in my journal, and to find that I am writing of the marriage and the parting with Laura, as people write of a settled thing. It seems so cold and so unfeeling to be looking at the future already in this cruelly composed way. But what other way is possible, now that the time is drawing so near? Before another month is over our heads she will be HIS Laura instead of mine! HIS Laura! I am as little able to realise the idea which those two words convey—my mind feels almost as dulled and stunned by it—as if writing of her marriage were like writing of her death.

December 1st.—A sad, sad day—a day that I have no heart to describe at any length. After weakly putting it off last night, I was obliged to speak to her this morning of Sir Percival's proposal about the wedding tour.

In the full conviction that I should be with her wherever she went, the poor child—for a child she is still in many things—was almost happy at the prospect of seeing the wonders of Florence and Rome and Naples. It nearly broke my heart to dispel her delusion, and to bring her face to face with the hard truth. I was obliged to tell her that no man tolerates a rival—not even a woman rival—in his wife's affections, when he first marries, whatever he may do afterwards. I was obliged to warn her that my chance of living with her permanently under her own roof, depended entirely on my not arousing Sir Percival's jealousy and distrust by standing between them at the beginning of their marriage, in the position of the chosen depository of his wife's closest secrets. Drop by drop I poured the profaning bitterness of this world's wisdom into that pure heart and that innocent mind, while every higher and better feeling within me recoiled from my miserable task. It is over now. She has learnt her hard, her inevitable lesson. The simple illusions of her girlhood are gone, and my hand has stripped them off. Better mine than his—that is all my consolation—better mine than his.

So the first proposal is the proposal accepted. They are to go to Italy, and I am to arrange, with Sir Percival's permission, for meeting them and staying with them when they return to England. In other words, I am to ask a personal favour, for the first time in my life, and to ask it of the man of all others to whom I least desire to owe a serious obligation of any kind. Well! I think I could do even more than that, for Laura's sake.

2nd.—On looking back, I find myself always referring to Sir Percival in disparaging terms. In the turn affairs have now taken. I must and will root out my prejudice against him, I cannot think how it first got into my mind. It certainly never existed in former times.

Is it Laura's reluctance to become his wife that has set me against him? Have Hartright's perfectly intelligible prejudices infected me without my suspecting their influence? Does that letter of Anne Catherick's still leave a lurking distrust in my mind, in spite of Sir Percival's explanation, and of the proof in my possession of the truth of it? I cannot account for the state of my own feelings; the one thing I am certain of is, that it is my duty—doubly my duty now—not to wrong Sir Percival by unjustly distrusting him. If it has got to be a habit with me always to write of him in the same unfavourable manner, I must and will break myself of this unworthy tendency, even though the effort should force me to close the pages of my journal till the marriage is over! I am seriously dissatisfied with myself—I will write no more to-day.

December 16th.—A whole fortnight has passed, and I have not once opened these pages. I have been long enough away from my journal to come back to it with a healthier and better mind, I hope, so far as Sir Percival is concerned.

There is not much to record of the past two weeks. The dresses are almost all finished, and the new travelling trunks have been sent here from London. Poor dear Laura hardly leaves me for a moment all day, and last night, when neither of us could sleep, she came and crept into my bed to talk to me there. "I shall lose you so soon, Marian," she said; "I must make the most of you while I can."

They are to be married at Limmeridge Church, and thank Heaven, not one of the neighbours is to be invited to the ceremony. The only visitor will be our old friend, Mr. Arnold, who is to come from Polesdean to give Laura away, her uncle being far too delicate to trust himself outside the door in such inclement weather as we now have. If I were not determined, from this day forth, to see nothing but the bright side of our prospects, the melancholy absence of any male relative of Laura's, at the most important moment of her life, would make me very gloomy and very distrustful of the future. But I have done with gloom and distrust—that is to say, I have done with writing about either the one or the other in this journal.

Sir Percival is to arrive to-morrow. He offered, in case we wished to treat him on terms of rigid etiquette, to write and ask our clergyman to grant him the hospitality of the rectory, during the short period of his sojourn at Limmeridge, before the marriage.

Under the circumstances, neither Mr. Fairlie nor I thought it at all necessary for us to trouble ourselves about attending to trifling forms and ceremonies. In our wild moorland country, and in this great lonely house, we may well claim to be beyond the reach of the trivial conventionalities which hamper people in other places. I wrote to Sir Percival to thank him for his polite offer, and to beg that he would occupy his old rooms, just as usual, at Limmeridge House.

17th.—He arrived to-day, looking, as I thought, a little worn and anxious, but still talking and laughing like a man in the best possible spirits. He brought with him some really beautiful presents in jewellery, which Laura received with her best grace, and, outwardly at least, with perfect self-possession. The only sign I can detect of the struggle it must cost her to preserve appearances at this trying time, expresses itself in a sudden unwillingness, on her part, ever to be left alone. Instead of retreating to her own room, as usual, she seems to dread going there. When I went upstairs to-day, after lunch, to put on my bonnet for a walk, she volunteered to join me, and again, before dinner, she threw the door open between our two rooms, so that we might talk to each other while we were dressing. “Keep me always doing something,” she said; “keep me always in company with somebody. Don’t let me think—that is all I ask now, Marian—don’t let me think.”

This sad change in her only increases her attractions for Sir Percival. He interprets it, I can see, to his own advantage. There is a feverish flush in her cheeks, a feverish brightness in her eyes, which he welcomes as the return of her beauty and the recovery of her spirits. She talked to-day at dinner with a gaiety and carelessness so false, so shockingly out of her character, that I secretly longed to silence her and take her away. Sir Percival’s delight and surprise appeared to be beyond all expression. The anxiety which I had noticed on his face when he arrived totally disappeared from it, and he looked, even to my eyes, a good ten years younger than he really is.

There can be no doubt—though some strange perversity prevents me from seeing it myself—there can be no doubt that Laura’s future husband is a very handsome man. Regular features form a personal advantage to begin with—and he has them. Bright brown eyes, either in man or woman, are a great attraction—and he has them. Even baldness, when it is only baldness over the forehead (as in his case), is rather becoming than not in a man, for it heightens the head and adds to the intelligence of the face. Grace and ease of movement, untiring animation of manner, ready, pliant, conversational powers—all these are unquestionable merits, and all these he certainly



possesses. Surely Mr. Gilmore, ignorant as he is of Laura's secret, was not to blame for feeling surprised that she should repent of her marriage engagement? Any one else in his place would have shared our good old friend's opinion. If I were asked, at this moment, to say plainly what defects I have discovered in Sir Percival, I could only point out two. One, his incessant restlessness and excitability—which may be caused, naturally enough, by unusual energy of character. The other, his short, sharp, ill-tempered manner of speaking to the servants—which may be only a bad habit after all. No, I cannot dispute it, and I will not dispute it—Sir Percival is a very handsome and a very agreeable man. There! I have written it down at last, and I am glad it's over.

18th.—Feeling weary and depressed this morning, I left Laura with Mrs. Vesey, and went out alone for one of my brisk midday walks, which I have discontinued too much of late. I took the dry airy road over the moor that leads to Todd's Corner. After having been out half an hour, I was excessively surprised to see Sir Percival approaching me from the direction of the farm. He was walking rapidly, swinging his stick, his head erect as usual, and his shooting jacket flying open in the wind. When we met he did not wait for me to ask any questions—he told me at once that he had been to the farm to inquire if Mr. or Mrs. Todd had received any tidings, since his last visit to Limmeridge, of Anne Catherick.

“You found, of course, that they had heard nothing?” I said.

“Nothing whatever,” he replied. “I begin to be seriously afraid that we have lost her. Do you happen to know,” he continued, looking me in the face very attentively “if the artist—Mr. Hartright—is in a position to give us any further information?”

“He has neither heard of her, nor seen her, since he left Cumberland,” I answered.

“Very sad,” said Sir Percival, speaking like a man who was disappointed, and yet, oddly enough, looking at the same time like a man who was relieved. “It is impossible to say what misfortunes may not have happened to the miserable creature. I am inexpressibly annoyed at the failure of all my efforts to restore her to the care and protection which she so urgently needs.”

This time he really looked annoyed. I said a few sympathising words, and we then talked of other subjects on our way back to the house. Surely my chance meeting with him on the moor has disclosed another favourable trait in his character? Surely it was singularly considerate and unselfish of him to think of Anne Catherick on the eve of his marriage, and to go all the way to Todd's Corner to make inquiries about her, when he might have passed the time so much more agreeably in Laura's society? Considering

that he can only have acted from motives of pure charity, his conduct, under the circumstances, shows unusual good feeling and deserves extraordinary praise. Well! I give him extraordinary praise—and there's an end of it.

19th.—More discoveries in the inexhaustible mine of Sir Percival's virtues.

To-day I approached the subject of my proposed sojourn under his wife's roof when he brings her back to England. I had hardly dropped my first hint in this direction before he caught me warmly by the hand, and said I had made the very offer to him which he had been, on his side, most anxious to make to me. I was the companion of all others whom he most sincerely longed to secure for his wife, and he begged me to believe that I had conferred a lasting favour on him by making the proposal to live with Laura after her marriage, exactly as I had always lived with her before it.

When I had thanked him in her name and mine for his considerate kindness to both of us, we passed next to the subject of his wedding tour, and began to talk of the English society in Rome to which Laura was to be introduced. He ran over the names of several friends whom he expected to meet abroad this winter. They were all English, as well as I can remember, with one exception. The one exception was Count Fosco.

The mention of the Count's name, and the discovery that he and his wife are likely to meet the bride and bridegroom on the continent, puts Laura's marriage, for the first time, in a distinctly favourable light. It is likely to be the means of healing a family feud. Hitherto Madame Fosco has chosen to forget her obligations as Laura's aunt out of sheer spite against the late Mr. Fairlie for his conduct in the affair of the legacy. Now however, she can persist in this course of conduct no longer. Sir Percival and Count Fosco are old and fast friends, and their wives will have no choice but to meet on civil terms. Madame Fosco in her maiden days was one of the most impertinent women I ever met with—capricious, exacting, and vain to the last degree of absurdity. If her husband has succeeded in bringing her to her senses, he deserves the gratitude of every member of the family, and he may have mine to begin with.

I am becoming anxious to know the Count. He is the most intimate friend of Laura's husband, and in that capacity he excites my strongest interest. Neither Laura nor I have ever seen him. All I know of him is that his accidental presence, years ago, on the steps of the Trinita del Monte at Rome, assisted Sir Percival's escape from robbery and assassination at the critical moment when he was wounded in the hand, and might the next instant have been wounded in the heart. I remember also that, at the time of the late Mr. Fairlie's absurd objections to his sister's marriage, the Count wrote

him a very temperate and sensible letter on the subject, which, I am ashamed to say, remained unanswered. This is all I know of Sir Percival's friend. I wonder if he will ever come to England? I wonder if I shall like him?

My pen is running away into mere speculation. Let me return to sober matter of fact. It is certain that Sir Percival's reception of my venturesome proposal to live with his wife was more than kind, it was almost affectionate. I am sure Laura's husband will have no reason to complain of me if I can only go on as I have begun. I have already declared him to be handsome, agreeable, full of good feeling towards the unfortunate and full of affectionate kindness towards me. Really, I hardly; know myself again in my new character of Sir Percival's warmest friend.

20th.—I hate Sir Percival! I flatly deny his good looks. I consider him to be eminently ill-tempered and disagreeable, and totally wanting in kindness and good feeling. Last night the cards for the married couple were sent home. Laura opened the packet and saw her future name in print for the first time. Sir Percival looked over her shoulder familiarly at the new card which had already transformed Miss Fairlie into Lady Glyde—smiled with the most odious self-complacency, and whispered something in her ear. I don't know what it was—Laura has refused to tell me—but I saw her face turn to such a deadly whiteness that I thought she would have fainted. He took no notice of the change—he seemed to be barbarously unconscious that he had said anything to pain her. All my old feelings of hostility towards him revived on the instant, and all the hours that have passed since have done nothing to dissipate them. I am more unreasonable and more unjust than ever. In three words—how glibly my pen writes them!—in three words, I hate him.

21st.—Have the anxieties of this anxious time shaken me a little, at last? I have been writing, for the last few days, in a tone of levity which, Heaven knows, is far enough from my heart, and which it has rather shocked me to discover on looking back at the entries in my journal.

Perhaps I may have caught the feverish excitement of Laura's spirits for the last week. If so, the fit has already passed away from me, and has left me in a very strange state of mind. A persistent idea has been forcing itself on my attention, ever since last night, that something will yet happen to prevent the marriage. What has produced this singular fancy? Is it the indirect result of my apprehensions for Laura's future? Or has it been unconsciously suggested to me by the increasing restlessness and irritability

which I have certainly observed in Sir Percival's manner as the wedding-day draws nearer and nearer? Impossible to say. I know that I have the idea—surely the wildest idea, under the circumstances, that ever entered a woman's head?—but try as I may, I cannot trace it back to its source.

This last day has been all confusion and wretchedness. How can I write about it?—and yet, I must write. Anything is better than brooding over my own gloomy thoughts.

Kind Mrs. Vesey, whom we have all too much overlooked and forgotten of late, innocently caused us a sad morning to begin with. She has been, for months past, secretly making a warm Shetland shawl for her dear pupil—a most beautiful and surprising piece of work to be done by a woman at her age and with her habits. The gift was presented this morning, and poor warm-hearted Laura completely broke down when the shawl was put proudly on her shoulders by the loving old friend and guardian of her motherless childhood. I was hardly allowed time to quiet them both, or even to dry my own eyes, when I was sent for by Mr. Fairlie, to be favoured with a long recital of his arrangements for the preservation of his own tranquillity on the wedding-day.

“Dear Laura” was to receive his present—a shabby ring, with her affectionate uncle's hair for an ornament, instead of a precious stone, and with a heartless French inscription inside, about congenial sentiments and eternal friendship—“dear Laura” was to receive this tender tribute from my hands immediately, so that she might have plenty of time to recover from the agitation produced by the gift before she appeared in Mr. Fairlie's presence. “Dear Laura” was to pay him a little visit that evening, and to be kind enough not to make a scene. “Dear Laura” was to pay him another little visit in her wedding-dress the next morning, and to be kind enough, again, not to make a scene. “Dear Laura” was to look in once more, for the third time, before going away, but without harrowing his feelings by saying WHEN she was going away, and without tears—“in the name of pity, in the name of everything, dear Marian, that is most affectionate and most domestic, and most delightfully and charmingly self-composed, WITHOUT TEARS!” I was so exasperated by this miserable selfish trifling, at such a time, that I should certainly have shocked Mr. Fairlie by some of the hardest and rudest truths he has ever heard in his life, if the arrival of Mr. Arnold from Polesdean had not called me away to new duties downstairs.

The rest of the day is indescribable. I believe no one in the house really knew how it passed. The confusion of small events, all huddled together one on the other, bewildered everybody. There were dresses sent home that had been forgotten—there were trunks to be packed and unpacked and packed again—there were presents



from friends far and near, friends high and low. We were all needlessly hurried, all nervously expectant of the morrow. Sir Percival, especially, was too restless now to remain five minutes together in the same place. That short, sharp cough of his troubled him more than ever. He was in and out of doors all day long, and he seemed to grow so inquisitive on a sudden, that he questioned the very strangers who came on small errands to the house. Add to all this, the one perpetual thought in Laura's mind and mine, that we were to part the next day, and the haunting dread, unexpressed by either of us, and yet ever present to both, that this deplorable marriage might prove to be the one fatal error of her life and the one hopeless sorrow of mine. For the first time in all the years of our close and happy intercourse we almost avoided looking each other in the face, and we refrained, by common consent, from speaking together in private through the whole evening. I can dwell on it no longer. Whatever future sorrows may be in store for me, I shall always look back on this twenty-first of December as the most comfortless and most miserable day of my life.

I am writing these lines in the solitude of my own room, long after midnight, having just come back from a stolen look at Laura in her pretty little white bed—the bed she has occupied since the days of her girlhood.

There she lay, unconscious that I was looking at her—quiet, more quiet than I had dared to hope, but not sleeping. The glimmer of the night-light showed me that her eyes were only partially closed—the traces of tears glistened between her eye-lids. My little keepsake—only a brooch—lay on the table at her bedside, with her prayer-book, and the miniature portrait of her father which she takes with her wherever she goes. I waited a moment, looking at her from behind her pillow, as she lay beneath me, with one arm and hand resting on the white coverlid, so still, so quietly breathing, that the frill on her night-dress never moved—I waited, looking at her, as I have seen her thousands of times, as I shall never see her again—and then stole back to my room. My own love! with all your wealth, and all your beauty, how friendless you are! The one man who would give his heart's life to serve you is far away, tossing, this stormy night, on the awful sea. Who else is left to you? No father, no brother—no living creature but the helpless, useless woman who writes these sad lines, and watches by you for the morning, in sorrow that she cannot compose, in doubt that she cannot conquer. Oh, what a trust is to be placed in that man's hands to-morrow! If ever he forgets it—if ever he injures a hair of her head!—



THE TWENTY-SECOND OF DECEMBER. Seven o'clock. A wild, unsettled morning. She has just risen—better and calmer, now that the time has come, than she was yesterday.

Ten o'clock. She is dressed. We have kissed each other—we have promised each other not to lose courage. I am away for a moment in my own room. In the whirl and confusion of my thoughts, I can detect that strange fancy of some hindrance happening to stop the marriage still hanging about my mind. Is it hanging about HIS mind too? I see him from the window, moving hither and thither uneasily among the carriages at the door.—How can I write such folly! The marriage is a certainty. In less than half an hour we start for the church.

Eleven o'clock. It is all over. They are married.

Three o'clock. They are gone! I am blind with crying—I can write no more——

* * * * *

[The First Epoch of the Story closes here.]